

My Special Birds and Blooms Story Remembered

By Tunis Romein II – His Last Writing

MY SPECIAL BIRDS AND BLOOMS STORY REMEMBERED

A century ago Dutch immigrants were settling in a section of Kankakee Country some distance south of Chicagoland. Their newly chosen area was near a river and surrounded by marsh and lowlands. It was seemingly a poor choice for farming, but not really, for the Dutch knew how to deal with lowlands – they drained them. The result was the establishment of a section of soft, rich, productive soil that was the basis for a miracle some years later, especially in the twenties. The miracle was a vast range of hundreds of acres of gladioli blooms extending as far as the eye could see in what were formerly wet lands. An additional part of the miracle was the immigration of many birds and other creatures settling along the dredge ditch streams.

In those days I saw evidences of the Dutch love for birds. Even though they were perfectionist in the layout of their fields, there were untidy mix-ups where killdeers had built their nests and farmers would turn their plows aside as a courtesy to the birds. These farmers would also take time in the fields to watch skylarks hundreds of feet in the air singing their hearts out, followed by a swift dive to earth and a graceful landing. As a fifteen-year-old these happenings were the beginnings of a noteworthy kind of education.

What we discovered, exploring the willows along dredge ditch creek banks led to an unusual experiment. Giant caterpillars were enjoying willow-leaf food. After their feeding sprees the caterpillars would weave their cocoons as a protection from winter cold. These we collected and kept in the house. Then in early summer following, we would place them outside, covered with cheesecloth. When the exquisite Polyphemus and Cecropia moths began to emerge we would set them up in squadrons on the front lawn. By evening we would enjoy watching them disappear in the twilight.

BobWhites were plentiful in the area. Sometimes when traveling on a back road we would meet up with a family ready to cross ; . . . We would stop and watch to see that they crossed safely.

One of our delights was fishing in the dredge ditches. Several species had moved in from the river including black bass, pickerel, sunfish, and carp. In one instance a heavy storm caused the river to overflow and we found several carp trapped in furrows unable to find their way back to the river.

Finally, we mention a pleasant memory, a patch of original prairie located not too far from where we lived, and more than that, we used to hear prairie chicken calls from a distance. Indeed a faint memory, for soon the prairie was gone and so were the prairie chickens. These memories, if I recall correctly, belonged mainly to the early twenties.

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